

[A Tie That Bound]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A TIE THAT BOUND

Date of First Writing February 15, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Jim Kelley (Negro)

Fictitious Name Ham Cloud

Street Address None

Place Blythewood, S. C. (Rural Section)

Occupation Tenant Farmer

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Reviser State Office

“De debil and he wars,” muttered Ham Cloud, an old gray-haired, copper-colored Negro, as he strode up and down, up and down the old walkway. The place, the old Ben Cloud farm, is located on the old Blythewood-Camden road, six miles east of Blythewood, South Carolina. It was August 18, 1918, and war time.

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"Honk, honk!" the auto horn sounded, as the driver's hand pounded on the button at the end of the steering shaft.

"Good morning, Ham! Don't you know me?" inquired a gray-haired white lady, who had just stopped at the front of the old farm house.

Pausing between the rows of spicy-scented boxwood, the old Negro stood for a moment, eyes with his blinking eyelids shaded with a trembling hand. He then [then?] /He slowly approached the car at the end of the lane. At last he saw and recognized the lady who had spoken to him.

"Bless my life, if it ain't Miss Alice done come back to de old place again!" They shook hands.

"Ham, is there anything to cause you trouble this morning? You appear look worried."

"Miss Alice, I was jes' thinkin' 'bout all de trouble dat am caused at dis place by de debil and he wars."

"You think this war is the work of the devil, Ham?" # "Dat I do, dat I do, Miss Alice. I 'lows dis war bizness am de work of de debil. It sho' is, caze I members 'bout de time when Marse Ben hafter give up he three boys for de war. He say then dat war am de work of de debil. So when Gin'al Sherman and he sojers comes through here, dey proves it - what dey couldn't carry off dey destroy. I's wor'ed 'bout my two boys what lef' here yestiddy for de war, for dey tells me dem Germans ain't nebber seed a nigger."

"Ham, you say you remember when General Sherman's army came through this country, and what they did?"

"I members all 'bout it, Miss Alice. When us heard through some of Gin'al Wade Hampton's sojers dat de Yankees had done burnt Columby down 3 and was marchin' on to de No'th,

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stealin' and burnin' as dey go, me and Marse Ben got busy. I hope him to hide de things on de place out in de woods and de fields." He began to laugh.

"What happened then, Ham."

"Lawd, hab mercy! Jes' a whole passel o' Yankes pass right by dis house. I was standin' in dis walk one day when a crowd of dem, all dress up in dey blue uniform, stop at de gate. One ask me whar Marse Ben and all de folks. I says to him, 'Suh, I dunno; I jes' one o' de free niggers lef' to stay in our house and look atter our things.' Yes'm, I's twelve years ole den, and I members it well."

"You are right, Ham. You were just twelve years old; for you were born in February, 1853, a slave on my grandfather's plantation. Your father, I have been told, had Arab blood in his veins and was a descendent of Oriental royalty. He was the plantation wheelwright and blacksmith. His wife, your mother, was a servant in the home; and you, consequently, spent much of your early life around the kitchen and farm workshop. Grandfather taught you to do a little reading and scribbling, did he not?"

"Dat he do, dat he do, Miss Alice. And, further mo', he reads de Bible to me and to de other niggers on de place on Sunday. And, Miss Alice, he sho' was agin dis war bizness. I hear him say one day, when dey was havin' all dat argyment 'bout Kansy, or some place lak dat way out yonder, dat hit was gwine cause de debil to git turn loose. But in spite of all he could say and do, de white folks kept on talkin' and gittin more and more excited 'bout de niggers till de war comes."

"That's right, Ham, the State seceded from the Union in December, [1860?], and organized an army. My father and his two brothers, Henry and Oscar, 4 enlisted in the State service. Later, they were sent to Virginia with General Johnson Hagood's brigade and were with that brave band at Walthall Junction, Drury's Bluff, and Weldon Field. Uncle Henry fell in that famous charge at Weldon Field on August 21, 1846. Father and Uncle Oscar were

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among the few who surrendered to General Sherman at Hillsboro, North Carolina; and they came home soon thereafter afterward .”

“Yes'm, I 'members de very day dey comes home. I was out minin' de two cows what was lef' on de place after Gin'al Sherman and he sojers pass. I look up and I see two raggedy-lookin' men comin' down de road, and I say to myself, 'Ham, I believes one of dem sojers is Master Fayette, sho' as you bawn.' So when dey got on down de road where I wuz, one say, 'Who's nigger you is, boy?' I says, 'I's Ham, and still your nigger, Master Fayette.' And I was sho' glad, Miss Alice, to see 'em come home.”

“Yes, Ham, I know all must have been glad the war was over and our heroes at home again. But, for some reason, Uncle Oscar wasn't satisfied with a quiet life at home, and he soon went on his way to the West. Father was different; he wished to settle down and live a quiet life. Grandfather died, you know, two years after the boys came home from the war, and that left Father and you in charge of the farm.”

“Yuh know, Miss Alice, Master Fayette always seem lak a great big brudder to me atter ole Marse Ben died. It was lak dis wid me - I knowed dat I would always be jes' a nigger, and I didn't want nobody 'cept Master Fayette and other members of de Cloud family to be callin' me nigger. When I wasn't lookin' after our cows, hawgs, sheep, and other things on our place, I rid with Master Fayette and de udder red shirt while folks. Kack, kack, kack!”

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“What are you laughing about, Ham.”

“Yuh know, Miss Alice, all de sho' nuff niggers aroun' de Bear Creek settlement was listnin' to all dat talk 'bout forty acres and a mule dat was bein' put out at dat time by po' white trash from de No'th so's to git de crazy niggers to keep 'em in office so dey could steal our money we paid for tax. I was flyin' 'round Corrie Perry at de time. All her folks was votin'

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wid de 'Publicans and Sinners at dat time. So she say to me one day, 'Honey, I hafter quit lovin' you efan you don't quit wearin' dat red shirt.'"

"Yes, Ham, I recall how you looked after the livestock, drove the carriage horses for us, and rode with my father as a Red Shirt in the Hampton campaign. But it required Sledgehammer, your pet ram, and Corrie, your best girl, to make you wake up and become religious. Ham, I have a copy of one of Cousin William Barber's sermons. You know he once preached at Zion, the church to which you drove the family carriage for us so long. After Cousin William left the Zion charge, he told a story about you in one of his sermons."

"Wh-wh-what he preach about me, Miss Alice?" inquired Ham Cloud, with a puzzled look on his wrinkled face.

After "Miss Alice" had pushed back her gray hair and adjusted her glasses, she took from her handbag a bit of paper yellowed with age. Then she said, "Ham, I've brought this with me to read to you, as I felt you'd be interested. It's a copy of a part of that sermon." She began:

"It was in midsummer, and the weather was clear and warm that Sunday. It was so warm in the church that it was necessary to the comfort of all present to have all of the windows and doors open. The wide front entrance to the church was directly in front of the pulpit, and I could see out into the grove beyond the front lawn. In fact, I was the only one in the building who could very well have that view and be in position to note the things that happened out there during the hour of my message. In the midst of my sermon, I saw Brother Lafayette Cloud's Negro driver, Ham, walk to a large pine and seat himself on the ground by the side of that tree. His head soon began to nod in sleep. Just then a flock of sheep came bounding into view. Among them was a large vicious-looking ram. He saw the young Negro and evidently mistook his nodding head for a challenge to physical combat. The ram backed away a few yards to the front of the sleeping Negro and then, for a few

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moments, he stood facing him. For every nod of Ham's head, the large sheep would give a nod of his head in return, in such a way that his brute mind may have prompted him to ask. 'Why should you question my right to be here?' They nodded until the ram could stand it no longer. He lowered his head, dug his hoofs into the ground, and charged. Even though Ham Cloud was not physically damaged, he was awakened by the compact impact to the danger of sleep at such a place and at such an hour.'"

"Dat am de whole truth, Miss Alice. Ole Sledgehammer hit me so hard dat day I saw stars in Hebben. He sho' knock some sense in my head. He put me to dreamin' so hard dat I 'gin to see visions of cattle, sheep, and goats on de hillsides. And after I gits thor'ly 'roused I goes right straight to Corrie's house dat nex' night and say to her, 'Corrie, I's a change man; I is gwine to jine de church and live in de harves' till I die. I want you to he'p me make my dream come true.' She was only too glad dat I come, and us went right straight on de nex' day and git married. And you 'member, 7 Miss Alice, dat very same preacher, Mr. Barber, 'form de ceremony for me and Corrie right here in de big house parlor in de presence of Master Fayette and all of you."

"I remember the day you and Corrie got married very well. It was on August 2, 1878, and was during what we used to call lay-by time on the farm. We were having a protracted meeting at Zion, and the colored Methodist in the community were having protracted meeting at Shady Grove at the same time. You joined Shady Grove then, didn't you, Ham?"

"Dat's sho' right, Miss Alice. Me and Corrie was so happy after our weddin' dat us got up on de flo' and shout. I bounce so high one night dat I hit my head on de low joist in de church. Den befo' I knowed it I loss part of my 'ligion and cuss right out befo' de officers of de church, and dey come nigh turnin' me out de church befo' I hardly gits in it."

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"But you did settle down after that, and you and Corrie went to work for my father as a tenant farmer on the Baxter place. He sold you, on credit, a plow mule and gave you Crump, the milk cow. He knew of your ambitions, and he wanted to help you."

"Yes'm, Master Fayette was sho' good to me, and I tried to show my 'preciation by workin' hard. But somehow it look like things wouldn't turn out right for me durin' of de fust few years me and Corrie went to farmin'. I wanted my fust bawn chillun to be boys, and I wanted Crump to fin' heifer calves for me. It turnt out de other way 'round, and I finds myself with two daughters and two bull calves on my hands. But when de year 1882 comes, my luck change; and I jus' had to run tell Master Fayette 'bout it. When I foun' him, I say:

"'Marse Fayette, does you member 'bout de rabbit us kilt in de graveyard 8 year befo' las?'"

"'Why, yes, Ham. But why do you ask?'"

"'Hit like dis, Marse Fayette. I been carryin' de left front foot off dat rabbit in my right-hand-pants pocket ever since, and my luck done change 'round.'"

"'What has happen', Ham?' he say.

"'I's gone to havin' boy babies and gal calves to come to my house.'"

"'I'm glad to hear of your good luck. What are you going to name your son?' he ask me.

"'Den I say, 'Well, Marse Fayette, I name my first chile Mary, and my nex' chile Martha. So I reckon I hafter call de one bawn today, Lazarus.'"

"Yes, Father knew how ambitious you were and how hard you worked, and he wanted to help you. Ham, I have never understood how it was possible for you to bind into bundles,

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in one day, that seven-acre field of high-yielding oats your brother-in-law, Major Perry, cut with a grain cradle that hot day in June, 1885.”

“Lawd, Miss Alice, dat was de hardes' days work I ever did do in my life. I was so tired when night come dat I fall down and dream a curious dream all night long. When mornin' come, I still tired. You know, Miss Alice, I dream so hard dat night I foun' out later when I woke up dat de witches had ride me plumb to Camden and back - thirty miles.”

“And quite incidentally,” commented Miss Alice, “Major Perry preached in his sleep that same night. And he continued to preach in his sleep for the remainder of his life, I understand. He moved from Bear Creek, in 1890, to Salude County, and from there he went with a traveling show to demonstrate his habit, or affliction. He outlined his text verbatim and preached in 9 perfect English, despite his inability to read or write. (The State: Dec. 9, 10, 12, 1906.)

“You know, Ham, we have always appreciated your staying on with my father and the help you gave to him during his last years. It was you he always wanted to accompany him when he traveled from home on business or any other mission. The last trip you ever made with him was to Ridgeway during the summer of 1894. It was during the early days of the Tillman campaign, and the political lines were strongly drawn between the Tillmanites and the anti-Tillmanites. Father, I understand, became engaged in a friendly, yet heated, argument over politics.”

“He do. He sho' do. And I was standin' right dar by him. Seein' as how dey was gettin' purty loud lak, I say: 'White folks, if yuh finds yuh can't settle de argumentation widout havin' to use your fists, please don't hit Marse Fayette; hit dis nigger.'”

“Yes, yours and Father's friendship lasted to the end. He died soon after the trip to Ridgeway. And it was you who picked up his broken body after his fall from the wagon piled high with new-mown hay and placed him on his deathbed.

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“Miss Alice, de Lawd has sho' been good to me. I done live to see Marse Ben and Marse Fayette and your good mother put away at Zion Church. And I done live to see Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Mood, my chillun, grow up. I have sont 'em to school and done de bes' I could for 'em. Mary and Martha went to de No'th whar dey finish dey schoolin' to be teachers among de niggers in New York. So dar nobody lef' here now but me and Corrie. But Miss Alice, I's gwine live on dis lan' - on dis here Cloud place - and work in de harves' fiel' till I die.”

MCB